United Nations A/HRC/38/NGO/85

General Assembly

Distr.: General
11 June 2018

English only

Human Rights Council
Thirty-eighth session
18 June-6 July 2018
Agenda item 4
Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[25 May 2018]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

GE.18-09471(E)
1809471

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Syrian Arab Republic: Investigate human rights violations and war crimes of the Turkish army in Afrin must be investigated

On January 20, 2018, the Turkish army launched "Operation Olive Branch" against the Syrian-Kurdish region of Afrin in the Northwest of the Syrian Arab Republic. The armed attack of the Turkish army on the region of Afrin is to be seen as a violation of international law.

There are about three million Kurds living in the Syrian Arab Republic, making up about 15 percent of the total population. Most of them live in the two (unconnected) enclaves of Jazira and Afrin in the north of the country. During the Syrian civil war, it was possible to keep up a fairly peaceful life in Afrin for quite a long time, and many believed that the region could serve as a cradle of democracy in the Syrian Arab Republic. Afrin was supposed to become a self-governed region within a federal state – including minority protection. Afrin was more than just a home to its residents, but also provided shelter for many refugees – and there were hopes to build up a democratic and social society in the war region. Due to Turkey's illegal actions, Afrin is now occupied by the Turkish military.

The endless suffering of the civilian population

At least 300 civilians got killed in the Turkish attacks on Afrin, and the Turkish army arrested between 3,000 and 7,000 Kurds since the beginning of the occupation of the region. Many of the prisoners were tortured, and some were even tortured to death – for example, the 27-year-old Abdo Ibrahim from the village of Kokhara. He had been arrested on March 16, 2018, together with a group of other young men. Pro-Turkish fighters of the so-called "Free Syrian Army" (FSA) had looted homes and businesses of Kurdish people who had left Afrin due to the ongoing air raids. They loaded boxes of food and even goats onto pick-ups and trucks, and eyewitnesses later reported that the FSA-fighters had carried out full-fledged raids. They took everything they could. These raids lasted until the end of May.

"Islamization" of the region and oppression of women

Today, it is not enough for girls in Afrin to wear a headscarf. They are also forced to wear long robes – and there aren't any women without headscarves to be seen on the streets of Afrin. Before the invasion of the Turkish troops, women were able to dress as they liked. Also, almost 50 percent of the police officers were female. Back then, men who beat their wives were punished with imprisonment. They were also allowed to marry only one woman, polygamy was not allowed. Now, the women have lost their liberties, and Islamic Sharia laws were installed.

The situation of the minorities

The region of Afrin is home to different nationalities, religions, and cultures: Before the Turkish war of aggression, Kurds, Arabs, Yazidis, Christians, Alawites, Arab-Sunni refugees, and even a few Armenians were able to live in Afrin in peaceful coexistence. According to the Evangelical Christian Union Church, there were about 250 Christian families in Afrin before the invasion of the Turkish army. Just like the members of the religious communities themselves, their regular places of pilgrimage are threatened by Islamization – or were destroyed already. This affects all non-Sunni minorities in the region of Afrin, including:

- Christian places of pilgrimage: the Qaziqli Shrine
- Alawite shrines: Yagmur Dada, Aslan Dada, Ali Dada, Maryam Dada
- Sacred sites of the Yazidis: the village Sinka, shrine Sheikh Ghraib
- Sites that are important for more than one religious group: shrine Sheikh Barakat – which is important with regard to the Yazidi new year, but also for Muslims as well as for the Druze.

The Turkish army did not spare cultural assets and historical sites in the Syrian Arab Republic. For example, there were attacks on the remains of a Late-Hittite temple (13th to 8th century BC) near Tell Ain Dara, and further attacks also led to the destruction of the Hori ruins and Kurdish cemeteries, including the grave of Nuri Dersimi, an Alevi-Kurdish politician and important Kurdish leader.

The Turkish invasion poses a real threat to many minority groups – especially as there are radical Islamists among the militants, who feel hatred towards other believers. The Yazidis, for example, are particularly vulnerable: Thus, Turkish fighter jets attacked Kurdish-Yazidi villages or villages with Yazidi inhabitants in the region of Afrin, near Mount

Simon – such as Basufan, Baadı, Barad, Kimar, Iska, Shadere, Ghazzawiya, Burj Abdalo, and Ain Dara. The people were forced to flee to the nearby mountain caves of Mount Simon. The Yazidis are an integral part of Afrin: they have been living in the region for thousands of years, which is well documented by Yazidi inscriptions on the walls of temples and monuments. Today, there are about 20,000 to 30,000 Yazidis living in the region. They live in fear of the Turkish-backed Islamist militias, especially as some of the fighters are said to be former members of the terrorists of the so-called "Islamic State" (IS). This was confirmed by a report published by media organization Ezidipress, according to which soldiers of the FSA deliberately tried to hunt down members of minority groups such as the Yazidis.

On March 14, 2018, the Turkish-backed Islamists announced to have "liberated" the Yazidi village of Feqira (Qizilbas), one of the few villages in the region of Afrin with an entirely Yazidi population. In a video that was published on Facebook, they shout: "Allahu Akbar!" – which was most probably the first time since the end of the Ottoman rule in 1918 that this call was to be heard in the village.

Traditionally, the district of Mabata in Afrin is a home to Alawite Kurds. Just like the Yazidis, they are in mortal danger because the radical Islamists see Alawites as apostates who must be eliminated. Thus, Turkish fighter jets attacked Mabata on January 27, 2018, at around 4:00 am. Seven members of the same family lost their lives in the bombing.

These are also very difficult times for the Christians in Afrin: On January 21, Pastor Valentine Hanan addressed the international community on behalf of his "Good Shepherd Church", calling on the civilized world to protect the small Christian community in Afrin. Since most of Afrin's Christians, about 1,000 people, converted from Islam to Christianity, the Turkish soldiers and Syrian Islamists consider them to be "outlawed". Overall, the people living the Afrin region are quite tolerant towards other religions. Following the atrocities committed by the so-called IS in recent years, some of the Muslim people converted to Christianity as a personal statement against radical Islam. Their Muslim neighbors usually accepted this – but from Erdogan's point of view, it is "not Muslim enough" to be so tolerant. Currently, he is trying to introduce Sharia laws to the region.

For those who fled to Afrin, the situation is especially precarious. For example, the Turkish army repeatedly attacked the Robar refugee camp (with about 3,120 inhabitants).

Following are Society for Threatened Peoples pleas to the Human Rights Council:

1. All arms deliveries and arms exports to Turkey must be stopped immediately.
2. The Turkish war of aggression and the illegal occupation of Afrin must be condemned – and the Turkish army must withdraw from the north of the neighboring country Syrian Arab Republic. In addition, the NATO countries must provide enough medical supplies and food for the civilian population in Afrin – and it must be ensured that Afrin will be able to keep an autonomous status in the Syrian Arab Republic.
3. The civilian population of Afrin must be protected from Islamist attacks. The plundering and the arbitrary arrests must be stopped immediately – and there have to be measures to ensure that the displaced persons can return.
4. War crimes committed by the Turkish army, by Islamist militias, and other conflict parties must be documented, to ensure that human rights violations and other crimes can be punished.
5. Religious minorities such as the Yazidis, the Alawites, and the Christians must be protected! There have to be measures to secure freedom of belief in Afrin – and it will be necessary to try and prevent and to condemn the destruction of shrines of the Yazidis and the Alawites, as well as the destruction of the graves of the people from Afrin who tried to defend the region.
6. The women of the region need special protection, and there have to be measures to restore full equality between men and women.
7. Turkey and the Syrian opposition must be kept from spreading the ideology of a radical Islam in Afrin.
8. The Kurds need help in restoring the autonomous self-government throughout the Afrin region and in trying to protect the Kurdish identity of the Afrin region. An ethnic cleansing by Turkey must be prevented.
9. There have to be measures to help prepare and carry out free and democratic elections in the autonomous region of Afrin.